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ABSTRACT

Although research in goal setting has demonstrated that specific, difficult goals lead to better performance, more refined research on the affect of participative decision making and supportive leadership on goal setting has produced ambiguous results. To investigate the relative importance of goal setting, leader supportiveness, and task structure on performance in a clerical task, 40 male college students were assigned to one of eight conditions in indexing a chapter from a textbook. The assigned conditions were: assigned vs. participatively set goals; supportive vs. nonsupportive leader; and structured vs. unstructured task. Goal difficulty remained constant. Upon completion of the task, subjects evaluated goal setting and leadership style on a Likert-type questionnaire and the Consideration Scale of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire Form 12. An analysis of the results showed that increasing task structure significantly enhanced performance as did assigned task goals. Supportiveness interacted with method of goal setting such that a supportive leader who assigned a performance goal produced significantly higher worker performance levels than any other condition. (BL)

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Goal Setting Participation and Leader Supportiveness Effects on Performance

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Abstract

Forty male undergraduate university students were assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (assigned vs. participatively-set goals) x 2 (supportive vs. nonsupportive leader behavior) x 2 (highly structured vs. relatively unstructured task) factorial design. Goal difficulty was held constant across all eight conditions. Increasing task structure significantly enhanced performance as did assigned task goals. Supportiveness interacted with method of goal setting such that a supportive leader who assigned a performance goal produced significantly higher worker performance levels than any other condition.

Effects of Participation and Leader Supportiveness on Performance

Research in goal setting has consistently demonstrated that specific, difficult goals lead to better performance than either easy or general goals on both laboratory and job tasks (Latham & Yukl, 1975; Locke, 1968; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Recent experiments designed to assess the impact of employee participation in goal setting provide inconclusive evidence as to the effectiveness of participative management (Locke, et al., 1981). Latham, Mitchell, & Dossett (1978) found that participation led to higher goals being set, prompting goal difficulty to be held constant between assigned and participative goal setting conditions in later studies (e.g., Dossett, Latham, & Mitchell, 1979; Latham & Saari, 1979a). In these studies participation did not result in higher performance.

Latham and Saari (1979b) tested the importance of participative goal setting and supportive leadership (Likert, 1967) in a brainstorming task. Participatively-set goals led to a significantly greater number of ideas generated for the uses of wood products than either assigned or "do your best" goals. Supportiveness, either by itself or in interaction with the goal setting manipulation, did not significantly affect performance. However, subjects in the supportive conditions set higher goals and perceived their goals as more difficult than those in the nonsupportive conditions. Latham and Saari concluded that supportiveness may be important to the extent that it gives supervisors and subordinates the confidence to set and accept more difficult goals.

Latham and Saari (1979a, 1979b) suggest that participation may increase subordinates' understanding of the effort and behaviors required for effective

task performance. It seems logical that this should be most pronounced for ambiguous tasks. This hypothesis might explain, in part, the discrepant results between their two brainstorming studies. In fact, participation significantly increased the number of ideas generated only in the brainstorming experiment in which subjects were not given categories for wood product uses prior to task performance (1979b). However, since task structure was not systematically manipulated in either study, further research is needed to determine whether this variable affects performance only by itself or in combination with employee participation and supervisory support strategies.

The present study was performed to assess the relative importance of these variables on performance in a clerical task. Goal setting (assigned vs. particpative), leader supportiveness (supportive vs. nonsupportive), and task structure (structured vs. unstructured) were manipulated in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with goal difficulty held constant across all goal setting and supportiveness conditions.

Method

Subjects

Forty male undergraduate students from a large midwestern university were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. Subjects received extra credit in their respective courses for their voluntary participation in the study.

Procedure

The supportiveness manipulation was a replication of the procedure described by Latham & Saari (1979b). In the supportive conditions the experimenter introduced himself in a friendly manner and shook the subject's hand, offered him a drink of water and a seat, and, in general, demonstrated

concern for his comfort and well being. In contrast, the nonsupportive experimenter immediately instructed the subjects to sit down upon their arrival, told them that he was in a hurry, continually glanced at his watch throughout the experiment, and, in general, behaved in an unpleasant, abrupt way.

Subjects were then administered a pretest which closely resembled the experimental task. Each subject was given a photocopied chapter from an organizational behavior textbook and a list containing all of the last names of authors referenced in the chapter. Subjects were instructed to place a check-mark next to each last name on the list every time they saw it referenced in the chapter. They were instructed to simply look for the references and tally the total number found in a 5-minute time limit.

After completing the pretest, subjects were provided with two photocopied chapters from an organizational behavior text and a list of author's last names referenced in the chapters. Their task was to search through the chapters and, in an author index, write the page numbers next to each author's name on which they were referenced. Subjects were allowed 7 minutes to complete the task.

Task structure was manipulated by altering the list of authors' names. In the structured conditions authors' names were alphabetized. Each name was followed by a series of blanks indicating the number of times it could be found in the two chapters. A colon separated two of the blanks associated with certain names indicating the number of times each name was referenced in both the first and second chapters. In the unstructured task conditions the list of names was randomized. No cues were provided to indicate the number of times each name was referenced in either chapter.

Subjects in the participative goal setting conditions were then asked to

suggest a difficult but attainable performance goal in terms of the number of references they would find in a 7-minute time limit. If the goal was too high or too low, the experimenter reemphasized that the goal should be difficult but also within the subject's reach, and asked him to consider a more appropriate level of goal difficulty. Previous research with the task revealed that a goal of 40 references would sufficiently challenge most subjects while allowing many to attain their goals. Since no convenient methodology seemed readily apparent for yoking goal difficutly across supportiveness conditions, it was decided to try to limit the range of "acceptable" goals in the participative conditions. Thus, subjects in the participative goal setting conditions were encouraged to choose a performance goal ranging from 37 to 43 references. Since subjects tended to suggest goal changes in increments of five, 19 chose a goal of 40. Only one person chose a goal of 38.

Subjects in the assigned goal conditions were simply given a performance goal by the experimenter. Goal difficulty was held constant across the two goal setting conditions by randomly assigning these subjects a performance goal which had been chosen by a counterpart in the participative conditions. Thus, through the yoking of goals and the nearly constant level of goal difficulty within the participative conditions, goal difficulty was effectively held constant across the eight conditions in the study.

A questionnaire was then administered containing 18 Likert-type items concerning goal acceptance, perceptions of goal difficulty, expectancy measures of goal attainment, personal influence over setting the goal, and perceptions of leader supportiveness (7-point scales). Six items from the Consideration scale of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire - Form XII (Stogdill, 1963) were also used as a manipulation check on perceptions of

leader supportiveness.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Goal Setting. A 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the 2-item participation measure (r=.37) was significant, $F(1, 32) = 13.72$, $p < .01$. Subjects in the participative conditions rated their participation as greater ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.18$) than those in the assigned goal conditions ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.66$).

Supportivevess. A 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA of the 9-item supportiveness scale (Cronbach's alpha = .81) revealed that subjects in the supportive leader conditions viewed the experimenter as more supportive ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .70$) than those in the nonsupportive conditions ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 32) = 11.47$, $p < .01$.

A significant main effect for goal setting strategy, $F(1, 32) = 7.66$, $p < .01$, indicated that subjects in the participative conditions perceived the experimenter as more supportive toward them ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .78$) than those in the assigned goal condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.13$). A three-way interaction between goal setting, supportiveness, and task structure, $F(1, 32) = 4.61$, $p < .05$, indicating that perceptions of support were strongest in the supportive, structured task, participative goal condition ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .82$) and weakest in the nonsupportive, unstructured task, assigned goal condition ($M = 4.91$, $SD = .57$), $t(8) = 5.91$, $p < .001$.

Goal Difficulty and Acceptance. No significant effects were found for goal difficulty. Similarly, a 6-item goal acceptance scale (alpha = .84) showed no differences across conditions.

Performance

Performance, the number of correct entries (page numbers) in the author

index, was analyzed by a 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of covariance. Ability (pretest performance) and personal goal level were used as covariates. The analysis of covariance revealed significant task structure effects, $F(1, 29) = 5.62$, $p < .05$, and goal setting main effects, $F(1, 29) = 6.50$, $p < .05$. Subjects in the structured task conditions and those in the assigned goal conditions had higher performance than their respective counterparts in the unstructured task and participatively-set goal conditions.

A significant goal setting by supportive relations interaction was also found, $F(1, 29) = 4.25$, $p < .05$. The mean performance of subjects in the assigned goal/supportive leader conditions was significantly greater than that of subjects in the assigned goal/nonsupportive conditions, $F(1, 29) = 6.70$, $p < .05$, as well as the performance of subjects in the participative goal/supportive leader conditions, $F(1, 29) = 11.48$, $p < .01$. No other significant differences were found. Table 1 presents the relevant means and standard deviations.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Discussion

The fact that assigned goals led to higher levels of performance than participatively-set goals is consistent with the results of at least two prior experiments (Dossett, et al., 1979), but is at odds with the findings of Latham and Saari (1979b). Participation may enhance performance to the extent that it encourages the setting of more difficult goals than would be unilaterally assigned, or to the degree that task relevant information is shared through the participation process. Latham and Saari (1979b) report that the subjects in their participative goal setting conditions asked more performance related questions than those in the assigned goal conditions.

This was not true in the present study. Thus, the present results question assertions regarding the direct benefits of participative management for motivational purposes when goal difficulty is controlled.

Our failure to find a significant main effect for leader supportiveness on performance is also consistent with prior research (see Latham and Saari, 1979b) and indicates that, by itself, supportiveness may have no direct implications for motivating superior performance. Latham and Saari (1979b) conclude that, "Supportiveness appears to be important to the extent that it gives subordinates and supervisors the confidence to set high goals, which in turn lead to high levels of performance" (p. 154).

Our results suggest that the two key elements of System 4 management (Likert, 1967) are difficult performance goals and supportive leadership. When faced with a situation that entails the completion of a clerical task with specific performance standards, we conclude that assigned goals are more motivating than participatively set goals, and that optimal worker effort can be expected if goals are unilaterally set by a supportive supervisor. This conclusion, based upon laboratory data, is in complete accord with the results of Dossett, et al. (1979) for clerical employees setting behavioral performance appraisal goals. It appears that motivation is enhanced when a supervisor sets difficult performance goals and expresses concern for his/her employee's well-being and confidence in their ability to perform well. Participation seems to be unimportant for purely motivational purposes provided that difficult goals are set and accepted.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Means Adjusted for the Covariates for Significant Performance Effects

Source	Mean	SD	Adjusted Mean
Task Structure			
Structured	38.60	7.91	37.93
Unstructured	31.95	7.46	32.82
Goal Setting			
Assigned	37.95	7.95	38.22
Participative	32.90	8.16	32.53
Goal Setting X Support			
Assigned/Supportive	41.89	7.68	42.07
Assigned/Nonsupportive	34.40	7.14	34.36
Participative/Supportive	32.50	8.04	31.86
Participative/Nonsupportive	33.30	8.68	33.20